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Colonial Tea Plantations and Indentured Labour in Cachar: Migration, Exploitation, and Identity Formation in Nineteenth-Century Assam

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Abstract

The establishment of the tea industry in Cachar, following its annexation by the British in 1832, marked a significant phase in the colonial transformation of Assam's economy and society. Beginning in 1856, tea cultivation rapidly expanded, and by the late nineteenth century, Cachar had emerged as one of India's principal tea-producing regions. However, this expansion was deeply dependent on the large-scale importation of indentured labour from eastern and central India, particularly from Chotanagpur, Bihar, and Orissa, to address the acute shortage of local labour. This study examines the historical trajectory of labour migration and the socio-economic conditions that propelled it in Cachar during the nineteenth century. By situating Cachar's tea labour history within the broader framework of colonial capitalism and migration, the research underscores how economic exploitation and cultural convergence together forged a unique plantation society.

Keywords: *Cachar, Assam, Tea Plantation, Labour, Migration*

Introduction

Cachar was annexed by the British in 1832. Tea production started in Cachar in 1856, and by 1869, the industry got firmly established in Assam, and Cachar had become the centre of producing a bulk percentage of tea in India.[1] During the middle of the 19th century, when tea was discovered in Cachar, a vast area of land was available. It was also a sparsely populated area. As the population was small, the planters faced an acute labour shortage. The existing population was too small to meet the demand of the tea plantation. Moreover, the people were self-sufficient, had enough to eat and were reluctant to sell their labour power. In such situation the planters had no substitute but to go for the import of labour. The 19th century was a great age of mass migration. Thousands of people in different parts of the world were uprooted and transported to different regions where they recreated their own world. The British Government devised a special type of migration under the 'indentured' system. A large number of indentured labourers were brought from the Chotanagpur area (now in Jharkhand) to cater to the needs of the tea plantation in Cachar. The first consignment of such indentured labourers reached Sadarghat, Silchar in 1863.[2]

So far, the identity problem is concerned the Tea Community of Assam, who constitutes a substantial amount of the Upper Assam's population today. The impacts of the inherent peculiarities of the plantation system force the plantation labour to constitute a social category having limited interaction with the outside world of the tea plantation. This division was sharpened by the fact that the migrant workers were deliberately insulated from the local population by the plantation management during the colonial period. The lack of communication facilities in the tea garden areas also meant that the workers lost almost all contact with their

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native places which were far away from Assam, so that their descendants became permanent residents of the region.

It is a fact that the Tea Plantation industry exerted some unique influences on the society of these recruited labourers. Before migration to this place, these people belonged to different ethnic groups, cultural backgrounds, status, families and demands. But after migration to here and living more than a hundred and fifty years in Assam and engaged in the Tea Industry they have come to convergent point creating a common culture and evolving a common lingua franca. The Tea Industry has brought a new common type of economy, administration, housing pattern and social environment. For all official purposes a labour is considered as a member of the entire workforce of the plantation but not as that of a particular tribe or caste or community. And even by the other social group of Assam these people are always treated a single group of people; never regard by their different caste and tribe. Living more than one hundred fifty years in Assam and engaged in Tea Industry they have come to a convergent point creating a common culture and evolving a common lingua franca.

Girban Biswas have argue that the fact behind the labour migration in Cachar region was that the labour shortage in Cachar and the labour who came had to come to save themselves from destitute, hunger, starvation, poverty and misery.[3] Sunil Pio argues that the problem of identity was faced by the tea labourers of Assam and a systematic study is needed to understand the problem properly.[4] Dwarkanath Ganguly, Amalendu Guha, K. L. Chattopadhyay and Prasenjit Choudhury, through their writings, exposed the harsh realities faced by the indentured labourers in the tea gardens of Assam.[5] Scholars like Geetashree Singh, Jayeeta Sharma, Nitin Varma, and Rana P. Behal reveal that the Assam tea industry's labour system was a coercive, state-supported structure. They trace how colonial capitalists recruited and disciplined migrant *coolie* labour through exploitative practices, shaping a controlled, racialised, and dependent workforce central to the growth of the colonial plantation economy.[6] Although extensive research has examined the colonial labour system and socio-economic exploitation in Assam's tea industry, the Cachar region remains underexplored. There is limited scholarly attention on how migration, isolation, and plantation discipline uniquely shaped the socio-cultural identity and collective consciousness of Cachar's tea labour community.

Tea Plantation in Cachar

Measured by the standard of value, the most important crop that is raised in Cachar is tea. The tree was discovered growing wild in Cachar in 1855, and the first plantation was opened in Mauza Barsangan in 1856. The gardens were at first laid out on the flat tops of the low spurs which project from the Barail towards the Barak. The area here available was unfortunately not large, and south of the river, planters turned to undulating land and the low, round-topped hills called *tilas*, which are dotted about the surface of the plain. When these hills are cleared of jungle, the soil is little inferior to that of the plateaux, which is of a chocolate colour, but the surface mould is washed away by the heavy rains, and the land, in consequence, loses much of its fertility. In 1875, the experiment was tried of planting out tea on low marsh land which had been thoroughly drained, and it was found that the rich soil yielded an exceptionally large return of leaf. The smaller drains are placed at intervals of about 30 feet apart, and in pure peat, considerable allowance has to be made for the shrinkage of the soil when drained. In some cases, *bil* land has sunk as much as four or five feet, and the tea has been killed by waterlogging, though in its uncleared state, the site seemed suitable enough. Gardens of this kind are found in every part of the district except the north and the north-west, and furnish a considerable proportion of the total crop. Although the tea grown on this soil is generally of lower quality than that from other locations, the difference in market value remains relatively small.[7]

In the 1860s, tea cultivation in Cachar was viewed more as a speculative venture than a stable industry. A common saying at the time suggested that, while it was uncertain whether producing tea would be profitable, establishing tea gardens would certainly bring financial gain. These gardens were often created with the

intention of being sold rather than cultivated for long-term returns. As Mr. Edgar, the then Deputy Commissioner, observed, very few investors expected profits from actual tea production; instead, most hoped to become rapidly wealthy by acquiring land, planting tea, and selling the property at a much higher price. Tea gardens often sold for 700 to 800 per cent more than their original cost, and in some cases, plantations existed only on paper when they were transferred to new owners. This unsustainable speculation eventually resulted in a crisis. In 1866, many enterprises collapsed, leading to a prolonged depression that lasted until 1869. During this period, it became clear that those who had invested carefully and worked consistently were earning substantial profits, and even many estates previously tied to speculative "bubble companies" began to perform well under proper management.[8]

The area under cultivation in Cachar was said to be 24,151 acres, which yielded 4,285,000 lbs. of manufactured tea, a quantity which exceeded that produced in the neighbouring district of Sylhet even as late as 1881. By 1882, the area under plant had risen to 48,878 acres and the yield to 12,721,000 lbs., which was considerably in excess of that returned from any other district in the Province. The industry continued to develop, though not as rapidly as elsewhere, and in 1898 the area under plant was 62,179 acres, and the outturn 20,898,000 lbs.[9] Then ensued a series of favourable seasons, and though there was a decrease in the cultivated area, the yield in 1901 was 81,088,000 lbs.[10]

Labour Supply

Because of the shortage of labourers, the planters had to find workers elsewhere, and they recruited them mostly from present-day Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh as indentured labour in slave like conditions, as most of them were uprooted from their land and livelihood, by the Permanent Settlement of 1793, meant to ensure regular tax collection for the colonial regime. Due to the impoverished condition, the workers had no choice but to find other sources of livelihood. Finding no alternatives, they were forced to follow the labour contractor and became indentured labour in Assam.[11]

The first attempt to import cheap labour from different regions of India was started in 1853, and between December 1859 to November 1861, 2,272 labourers were brought in, of whom 250 labourers died on the way.[12] Agents were sent to collect labourers from different parts of the country. Two types of ruthless labour brokers, called *Arkati* and *Sirder* were appointed as agents. They were initially engaged as commissioned agents in Kolkata to supply labour.[13] The planters encouraged migration of labour to the plantation of Assam in groups of families rather than individuals so that the planters could utilise the services of all family members, men, women, children and also to ensure the reproduction of labour for the next generation.

Among the migrant tea workers, more than 90 per cent originated from east, central and south-eastern India, including the Jharkhand area of Bihar (present Jharkhand state), northern and western Orissa, central and eastern parts of Madhya Pradesh, including the present Chhatisgarh state, Warangal and Khammam districts of Andhra Pradesh and Mirzapur, Varanasi and Ghazipur districts of Uttar Pradesh.[14] More than two-thirds of labourers came from Bihar and Orissa alone. A large section of the migrants to the tea gardens were drawn from the ranks of the aboriginal tribal groups from the Mundas, Oraons, Kharias, Kols or Hos, Bhumij and Santhals, Kurmis and Murasis. The second most important group of migrants were from semi-aboriginal castes like Ghasis and Goraits, Bauris and Turi. Finally, a smaller number was drawn from among low caste Hindus like the Bhogtas, Rautias, Chamars, Dasadhs etc.[15]

There is little local labour available for work on the plantations in the Cachar district, and most of the coolies have to be brought from other parts of India. The total number imported between 1880 and 1890 was 51,894, and during the next decade it was 75,412. During 1905, the supply of labour in the recruiting districts was quite inadequate, and the dearth of *coolies* is a source of inconvenience. Waste land suitable for the growth of rice was not, as a rule, to be found either on the grants themselves or in their neighbourhood; and *coolies* when

they leave the gardens, are compelled to settle in the remoter parts of the district, where their labour is lost to the industry. The cost of importation is considerable, and few people would be willing to expend large sums of money in bringing up labourers to the district, without some guarantee that, for a time, at any rate, they would be able to retain their services. This guarantee is afforded by Act XIII of 1859, which empowers a magistrate to order a man who has taken an advance of money on account of work to be done by him to complete his contract and to punish him with imprisonment if he declines to carry out this order. The number of cases in which the coolie is actually confined is, however, small.[16]

In the early days of the industry, the mortality amongst the imported *coolies* was extremely high, and the relations between the planters and their labour force were often far from satisfactory. The mortality in transit, too, was very heavy. Between May 1868 and January 31st, 1868, 52,155 *coolies* were imported to Cachar, of whom 2,456 or 4.7 per cent died during the voyage. As even at that time, the journey occupied less than a month, the rate of mortality can only be characterised as appalling. This was, however, happily changed, and in 1902-03, the death rate amongst adult *coolies* in Cachar was only 27 per mile. The statement in the margin shows the areas from which the labour force in 1901 had been recruited. Those born in Assam are, for the most part, children of immigrant *coolies*.[17]

According to Rana Behal, colonial state intervention in the recruitment and labour system of the Assam tea plantations began in February 1863, when the Bengal Native Labour Act III was passed in order to control and regulate the recruitment and transportation of labour.[18] In the middle of the 19th century, slave labour was replaced by the indenture system in most of the plantations developed by the colonial planters. Indenture meant legally bound debt bondage, which ensured that migrant workers could be forced to stay on in the plantations. The colonial government provided legality to indenture by enacting various laws that facilitated mass migration and the availability of labourers in the gardens. The migration and recruitment of labourers from outside Assam was continuing up to the 1950s, but by 1959 it had been reduced to almost negligible proportions, and was practically discontinued in 1960.[19]

Violence against Labourers

To realise the desired objective to immobilise workers and force work, the planters often circumvented the provisions of law and resorted to widespread detention, confinement and physical abuse. An incident reported from a plantation (in Cachar district) in 1864 alludes to the growing significance of this strategy, but also hints at its limits. During a morning muster, the manager of the garden, Schoneman, charged a worker named Summon for not strictly complying with his instructions. In his act of disciplining, Schoneman dragged Summon to a nearby tree, tied him up and hit him with fists and stones. Summon remained tied the whole day, and in the evening, when he was brought back to the coolie lines, he succumbed to his injuries. The following morning, when some workers made an attempt to leave the garden, they were caught and brought back to the garden. Again, around five workers were tied up to the trees and kept in that state until the next day. After their release, many workers of the garden collectively set upon and bound Schoneman and his assistant, took possession of his revolver and left for the *Sudder* station. They were intercepted by a senior police official (named Daley), with whom they lodged a complaint and willingly surrendered their arms.[20]

The isolated setting of the tea gardens in Assam and Cachar, abruptly sprouting in the midst of vast stretches of jungles and usually at the margins of the networks of communication and spaces of human habitation, most crucially contributed to such a condition during the 1860s. The Assam and Cachar planters strategically mobilised and involved the local society in '*coolie* policing' by compensating those who captured and brought back the runaways. In Cachar, for instance, the garden staff and the local villagers were paid Rs 5 for every catch. This was later adjusted from the earnings of the absconder.[21] Such practices were confirmed by several managers and superintendents of the tea companies.

These illegal practices of policing, detention and arrest were substantially incorporated within the framework of legality through the infamous 'right to private arrest' bestowed on the planters by the 1865 Act. Though generally approved and welcomed by the officials of the day, this 'extraordinary' right also managed to raise some eyebrows. A senior Bengal official, in a critical tone, remarked that, 'when the evils of the coolie's condition were brought to its (Government's) notice, it did not strengthen the district officers and insist on their protecting the labourers through the existing law. Instead of this, an Act (VI of 1865) was passed, which gave the employer the power of arresting runaways without warrant.'[22]

This became evident in another case reported from Burthol garden in Cachar. On 30th July 1868, 13 *coolies* deserted from the garden, and 11 of them were captured and returned and brought back to the plantation on the 1st of August. They were severely beaten by the manager Colvin and his syce Guru Dyal. One of the coolies named Bundhoo died within a few days, and others had marks of beating, and one even bore scars of the application of a lighted candle. On 10th August, Kalisundar Surmah, head constable of Lakhimpur, hearing rumours of the death of the coolie made investigations revealing the details of the case. The district authorities, on further enquiries, found out that the superintendent of the garden, Mr Davidson, a respectable planter of the district, had already been intimated about the incident by two coolies before the arrival of the police.[23]

In the late 1800s, the British colonial government in Assam introduced what they called a 'Free System' of labour for tea plantations. It was meant to replace the old, harsh, penal contracts used to control tea workers. However, in reality, this free system was not truly free. Officials kept defending the new system by saying it brought progress, opened new lands, and improved workers' lives. But critics argued that these claims were exaggerated and that exploitation still continued, just under a new name. The British government said that the 1882 Free System encouraged voluntary migration of labourers to tea gardens, supposedly freeing them from old restrictive laws. In practice, labourers were still tightly controlled. Many were recruited through middlemen (contractors and sardars) who often tricked or coerced people into joining plantations.[24]

In the Assam Valley, labourers worked under stricter Assam contracts that tied them to gardens for years and punished them for leaving. In the Surma Valley (especially Sylhet and Cachar), workers were often recruited more informally through local sardars and family networks. This gave them slightly more mobility and bargaining power, so colonial officials called them free labourers. At first, British officials wanted to abolish the old contract laws. But later, they changed their minds and said these contracts were actually beneficial. They claimed they gave workers some freedom compared to earlier systems. Tea planters supported the so-called 'free system' because it made recruiting cheaper and easier. They continued to depend on contractors who exploited workers, while pretending that the system was more humane.[25]

Despite official claims of freedom, tea labourers still faced low wages, hard work, poor housing, sickness, and little real choice. Many tried to escape, and desertion rates were high, especially in Surma Valley, where escape was easier due to better roads and communication. Planters found it cheaper to pay low wages and spend more on recruitment than to pay fair wages that would attract workers naturally. The Free System was not truly free. It was a new name for a system that still trapped tea workers in difficult conditions, keeping wages low and limiting their freedom, mainly to serve the interests of the British tea industry.

Conclusion

The history of tea plantations in Cachar reveals a complex intersection of colonial expansion, capitalist enterprise, and human exploitation. Established under British rule in the mid-19th century, the Cachar tea industry depended heavily on the migration of indentured labourers from Chotanagpur, Bihar, Orissa, and other regions. This migration, often coerced and facilitated through exploitative intermediaries, transformed the demography and socio-cultural landscape of the region. Though planters and colonial officials portrayed the system as a model of economic progress and "free" labour, in reality, it was sustained by coercion, debt

bondage, and legal restrictions that bound workers to plantations under harsh conditions. Scholars such as Rana Behal, Jayeeta Sharma, and Nitin Varma have shown that this labour regime was integral to the colonial political economy, designed to create a cheap, immobile, and disciplined workforce.

Despite such adversity, the tea labourers of Cachar developed a distinct socio-cultural identity. Over generations, diverse ethnic and linguistic groups merged to form what is now known as the 'Tea Tribe' or 'Tea Community' of Assam, an identity born out of shared struggle, isolation, and adaptation. The plantation system not only reshaped their economic lives but also forged a common culture, language, and social coherence. However, the historical injustices and structural inequalities embedded in this system continue to resonate. Thus, the story of Cachar's tea industry stands as both a testament to colonial exploitation and a remarkable narrative of human endurance, community formation, and socio-cultural transformation within the broader context of India's plantation history.

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